

ORM NEWS

**From the Office of the
Deputy Assistant Secretary for
Resolution Management
Department of Veterans Affairs**



September 2003

From the Deputy Assistant Secretary



Congratulations

EEOC Commends VA on Improvement to EEO Complaint Processing Program

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recently cited VA as one of two cabinet level agencies that showed significant improvement in their EEO complaint processing programs. VA was recognized for a 31 percent reduction in the average time for issuing a decision without a hearing. The other agency was the Department of State, cited for a 44 percent reduction in the time for conducting EEO investigations and a 22 percent increase in employee alternative dispute resolution (ADR) participation.

After discussing this with the Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication (OEDCA), we found that credit for this improvement really belongs primarily with ORM and is a result of your efforts to improve both the quality and timeliness of our counseling and investigative processes, thereby enabling OEDCA to render decisions quickly. I want to congratulate everyone involved for helping VA reach this milestone.

The improvements you achieved in reducing the average time for issuing a decision without a hearing, coupled with the positive notice by the EEOC, lead to me being interviewed by a Federal Times reporter. Comments from this interview appeared in two articles in the Federal Times of August 11, 2003. This interview

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permitted me to reach a larger audience to stress the importance of early dispute resolution, promote employer of choice environments to help reduce complaints, and to talk about environmental surveys (OCAP).

As you can see, the work you do everyday is generating positive notice and this enables us to spread the message about ORM's proactive efforts to address complaints, expand the use of mediation and highlight our other initiatives to improve service to our customers.

I encourage each of you to continue to strive to deliver the best services that you can and to let you know that we are being noticed for the improvements we are achieving.

James S. Jones ■

Program Highlights

COMPUTER EQUIPMENT DISTRIBUTION POLICY

ORM's policy covering the distribution of computer equipment has been completed.

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that computer systems purchased by ORM are assigned and distributed in a manner that makes full and efficient use of all computer resources available throughout ORM in the most cost-effective way. It outlines ORM policy for distribution of computer systems and user's responsibilities.



Highlights of this policy are:

- Each ORM employee will be assigned, on a permanent basis, one computer system in accordance with the guidelines contained in this document.

- ❑ **Desktop workstations are the systems of choice for ORM employees who do not have compelling reasons for portability.**
- ❑ **Laptops will be assigned to employees based on their demonstrated need for portability and the availability of systems in the existing inventory.**
- ❑ **ORM employees occupying the following positions are eligible for laptops with docking stations, as their permanent systems:**
 - 1. Deputy Assistance Secretary (DAS)**
 - 2. Chief Operating Officer**
 - 3. Investigators**
 - 4. Intake Specialists/Investigators (C2s)**
 - 5. Investigators / Counselors (C1s)**
 - 6. Managers who travel frequently (at least monthly)**
 - 7. DAS staff office personnel (i.e., Information Technology, Training, Enterprise, Customer Service, Quality Assurance, and Organizational Climate Assessment Program).**
- ❑ **Flexiplace employees are eligible to be considered for laptops.**
- ❑ **All laptops will be purchased by the ORM Information Technology Services (ITS) Division and will be issued by ITS personnel using the guidance contained in this document.**
- ❑ **A pool of laptops will be made available to those employees who have a short-term need for a laptop for travel, training, or temporary reassignment to another duty station.**
- ❑ **The ITS Division will issue pool laptops to the ORM Field Managers on the basis of one laptop for every five positions. ORM Field Managers will maintain a logbook of the short-term assignments of these systems to authorized personnel.**
- ❑ **The ITS Division will maintain a pool of laptops for ORM headquarters employees and employees of the Washington Field Office. These laptops will be available for short-term needs. The ITS Division will monitor the placement of these systems through a logbook.**
- ❑ **Any exceptions to this policy must be authorized, in writing, by the Chief Operating Officer (COO).**

Questions regarding this policy should be directed to ITS staff. ■

EEO INVESTIGATOR TRAINING BROADCASTS

On August 6, 7, and 19, 2003, ORM conducted EEO Investigator Refresher Training satellite broadcasts on Channel 34 of VA's knowledge network. The presentations addressed the Privacy Act and its impact on EEO investigations, tips on improving EEO investigations, and producing quality investigative reports. During each presentation, individuals were able to call in and receive answers to their questions on a variety of issues involving the investigative process.

The last satellite broadcast will be held on Friday, September 12th. It will be a panel discussion with several ORM staff. Individuals will again be able to call in with questions.

We want to thank [Alison Mangels](#), Executive Assistant to the COO, for her excellent work as the moderator for these broadcasts and the General Counsel, Office of Employment Discrimination Complaint Adjudication (OEDCA), and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) representatives who provided timely and responsive information to our employees on a variety of EEO investigative process issues.

The eight-hour refresher training is mandatory for all EEO investigators. Contact Learning Resources if you would like a copy of the broadcasts. ■

VA GUIDE TO PREPARING CORRESPONDENCE



Did you know you could find on-line guidelines for preparing VA correspondence?

VA's *Correspondence Guidelines* provide a source of information for preparing and processing correspondence within the Department. VA employees involved with correspondence, including administrative personnel, writers, and reviewing and concurring officials, will find the guidelines to be a very helpful, easy to use, reference tool for processing correspondence Department wide.

The guidelines, prepared by the Office of the Executive Secretary, are a valuable resource for anyone preparing VA correspondence. The Office of the Executive Secretary, a component of the Office of the Secretary, serves as the Department's central coordination point for all documents prepared for the review and signature of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary.

Secretary Principi, in his forward to these guidelines, states "Everyone writes. Whether it is a formal letter to a Member of Congress or a note to a

friend, writing is a fundamental element of our lives. Yet, there's hardly anything, aside from public speaking, that seems to cause more angst. Likewise, it is our written communications that serve us well, or serve us poorly."

These guidelines can help you address a variety of topics and they provide tips to help you:

- ❑ Prepare letters and memorandums,
- ❑ Ensure correct capitalization, punctuation and abbreviations.
- ❑ Sample documents to assist you in preparing your correspondence.
- ❑ Write correspondence in clear and concise language.
- ❑ Act on correspondence received in the Department promptly.

For more information on preparing VA correspondence, go to <http://vaww.execsec.va.gov/CorrespondenceGuidelinesTOCDetail.htm>. ■

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL CHARGE CARDS

VA's new policy and procedures for the use of VA government travel charge cards were issued to all ORM employees on September 1, 2003. Please take a moment to review this information to ensure you adhere to these requirements concerning the use of your government travel charge card. The following are excerpts from this policy:



- ❑ Employees who are issued a government contractor-issued travel charge card are responsible for ensuring that the card is used for authorized official travel expenses only.
- ❑ Using the card for personal purposes or allowing others, including family members, to use the card is prohibited.
- ❑ Employees may not use the charge card to make personal purchases or ATM withdrawals unrelated to official travel.
- ❑ Employees are required to use the government charge card when purchasing their own common carrier transportation. Federal Travel Regulations prohibit employees from using personal charge cards for purchasing common carrier transportation. Failure to use the government contractor-issued charge card for

official travel expenses as required in the Federal Travel Regulations may subject the employee to disciplinary action.

- ❑ Charge cards will be used for travel advances, lodging, meals, car rentals, and miscellaneous subsistence expenses related to official travel. Travel advances with the contractor-issued charge card are limited to the amount allowed for meals per travel day, depending on temporary duty location, plus amounts for anticipated taxicabs (if applicable), mileage, tolls, and laundry (if applicable).**
- ❑ The charge card is not to be used for the purchase of personal items.**
- ❑ An employee is not responsible for any charges incurred against a lost or stolen card provided the employee promptly reports the loss to the contractor under the terms of the card member agreement. Employees may call the contractor 24 hours a day for this purpose.**
- ❑ The charge card will be suspended when an outstanding balance becomes 60 days past due. The charge card may be unilaterally suspended without prior consultation. In all cases, outstanding balances must be paid in full. Partial payments are not permitted.**
- ❑ Authorized travel advances shall be obtained through an ATM using the charge card. VA has established the maximum amount that may be withdrawn in 1 week at \$400. The \$400 limit may only be increased on a case-by-case basis by the Office of Financial Operations (047F).**
- ❑ ATM advances are obtained solely for authorized government travel. Abuse of ATM privileges will result in disciplinary action.**
- ❑ Submit claims for travel reimbursement to the approving official within 5 workdays after completion of a trip.**

Please contact Barbara Scott at (202) 501- 2817 if you have questions concerning the use of government issued travel charge cards. ■

VA STRATEGIC HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

VA recently completed its first strategic human capital management plan. The *VA Human Capital Plan*, signed by Secretary Principi on July 24, 2003, uses the President's Management Agenda, the VA Strategic Plan for FY 2003–2008, and VA organizational plans as its framework, and identifies strategies to resolve system-wide problems that must be addressed at the corporate level.

This plan presents an overview of past and projected workforce trends; summaries of workforce plans developed by Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), National Cemetery Administration (NCA), and VA Central Office organizational components; as well as strategies to ensure that VA recruits, retains, and develops a quality and diverse workforce to serve veterans.

VA is implementing multiple initiatives to address the following workforce challenges identified in the VA organization plans:

- ❑ Attracting and recruiting high-caliber employees in a timely manner;
- ❑ Retaining high-caliber employees in mission-critical occupations;
- ❑ Developing future leaders;
- ❑ Building professional competencies and career growth opportunities;
- ❑ Preserving institutional knowledge; and
- ❑ Diversifying the workforce, particularly in leadership positions.

The following strategies will address workforce challenges within VA Central Office, (ORM as a component of Human Resources and Administration (HR&A), is part of VA Central Office):

- ❑ Development of more rigorous marketing and recruitment campaigns.
- ❑ Development of a process to identify high performing non-supervisory, as well as supervisory and managerial employees.
- ❑ Expand the use of current and available HR flexibilities.
- ❑ Technical training for current employees.
- ❑ Expand work-life initiatives.
- ❑ Increase the use of incentive awards.
- ❑ Increase the use of exit interviews.
- ❑ Customer and employee satisfaction surveys.
- ❑ Development of a workforce planning senior management position or workforce planning groups.
- ❑ Implement the High Performance Development Model.

ORM is cited in the plan, along with Office of Management (OM) and Office of General Counsel (OGC), as one of the VA Central Office organizations intending to use employee satisfaction surveys as important data sources for identifying potential work-life training issues. These survey results will be incorporated into overall training initiatives.

To view the entire Plan, go to
<http://vawww.va.gov/vaworkforceplanning/hcplan.htm>. ■

THE WORKPLACE STRESS AND AGGRESSION PROJECT

The Workplace Stress and Aggression Project is a VA research project focusing on how aggression and stress affect the workplace and how interventions designed to reduce workplace aggression and stress can have a positive affect on employee satisfaction, the quality and costs of services, and veterans' satisfaction in the VA.

This project involves the three administrations (Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and National Cemetery Administration), the Office of Occupational Safety and Health, the Office of Resolution Management (ORM), and a partnership with four universities (Farleigh Dickerson University, Wayne State University, the State University of New York at New Paltz, and Teachers College at Columbia University). Project Team members, drawn from across VA and from the four universities, are designing and implementing interventions that will reduce stress and aggression in their facilities.

Contact Odessa Johnson, Intake Specialist, Bay Pines Field Office, at (386) 754-7250 for more information on this project. ■

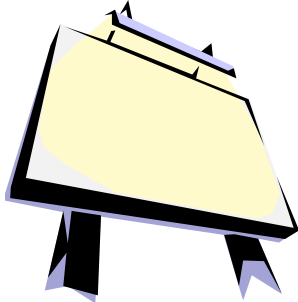
PROJECT CONNECT

The Office of Diversity Management and Equal Employment Opportunity (DM&EEO), in collaboration with Sprint and the CTIA Wireless Foundation, is sponsoring a VA-wide "Project Connect" phone drive. Collected cell phones are recycled and resold, with proceeds benefiting Easter Seals and the National Organization on Disability.

For more information, contact Noemí Pizarro-Hyman, DM&EEO, at (202) 501-2031. ■



Office Notes



Vancouver Field Office - Western Operations is proud to announce it's newest arrival... **Letty Dominguez**, EEO Program Assistant (Los Angeles Division) and her husband welcomed their first child **Samantha Summer** on August 17th. Baby Samantha weighed in at 7 lbs. 14 oz. Mother and daughter are doing well.

Little Rock Field Office - Mid-South Operations

Anselm Beach, EEO Intake Specialist, recently participated as a camp leader at the Quapaw Area Council's Scout camp. John Carman, Scout Executive commented, "his leadership was not only important to our camp operations, but most importantly, he helped to enrich the lives of many young scouts."

Carselia Renard, EEO Investigator, was a presenter during the Federal Executive Board's Annual Leadership Conference, held in New Orleans, LA on August 13, 2003. Ms. Renard stated that the training was geared to promote communications through educational awareness. The training setting was unique in that it was set in a game show type environment (Who Wants to be a Millionaire?) that involved the entire class of training participants. Titled, "The Federal Quiz Bowl" contestants were asked questions regarding a variety of topics such as retirement, which affect Federal employees. The Annual Leadership Conference is attended by all federal agencies in the Greater New Orleans Area. This was Ms. Renard's third year as an invited presenter. She received high reviews from the participants and her power point presentation has been requested by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's Office in New Orleans to be used in some of their training efforts.

Charlotte Barr, EEO Counselor, **Eleanor Kaye Wilson**, EEO Counselor, and **David Woodyly**, EEO Intake Specialist, attended the Basic Investigator's training course held in Bay Pines, FL the week of July 21-25, 2003. **Debora Grigsby**, EEO Counselor, **Linda Blohm**, EEO Specialist (C-2), and **David Woodyly**, EEO Intake Specialist, attended the Federal Dispute Resolution Training held in Orland, FL the week of August 11-14, 2003.

Congratulations to the Little Rock ORM office Mediation Team. In the month of July, the team co-mediated 8 cases, reaching 6 settlement agreements. Good work TEAM.

Cleveland Field Office - Great Lakes Operations

Bettye Brown, EEO Counselor, **Denene Mackie**, Investigator, **Jim Jindra**, Investigator attended the FDR Conference in Orlando 8/11-14, 2003. **Bettye Brown**, EEO Counselor attended the Basic Investigator Training in St. Pete's Beach Florida 7/21-25, 2003.

Tywanna Halstead, Field Manager, **Thurman Story**, Intake Specialist, and **Emir Ruple**, Administrative Officer attended the EXCEL Conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey 8/26-29, 2003. ■

BIG Conference

Mr. James Jones, Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) for ORM, Tyrone Eddins, Public Affairs Officer, Lamont Johnson, OCAP Program Manager, Mary Ellen Garcia, ADR Program Manager, and **Wesley Gregg Buckner**, Intake Specialist, Leavenworth, KS, were guest speakers at the recent Blacks In Government Annual (BIG) National Conference, held in Denver, the week of August 25, 2003. They provided an overview of ORM, its programs, and the EEO complaint process to conference attendees.

EEOC EXCEL Conference

Approximately 65 VA employees, including ORM staff, attended the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) annual EXCEL Conference held in Atlantic City, NJ, August 26 - 29, 2003. This year's theme was "Federal EEO Laws: Ensuring the Freedom for All to Complete." Cari Dominguez, EEOC Chair, delivered the keynote address. She emphasized the need for proactive prevention to help stem the flow of EEO complaints. She also announced the release of EEOC's Management Directive 715 that replaced EEOC Management Directives 712, 713, and 714. ■

Q and A

Q – What is the difference between mediation and arbitration?

A – Mediation is a voluntary process, bringing a neutral third-party into a negotiation as a facilitator. It may or may not lead to an agreement between the parties. Arbitration is a process agreed to by the parties in which, at its conclusion, a neutral third-party will impose a binding agreement on both parties.

Source: Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMC)

Did You Know?



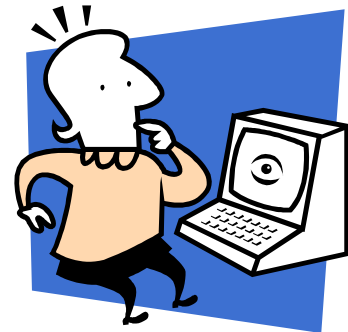
Retirement Benefit Calculations

Federal employees can obtain an estimate of their CSRS, CSRS Offset and FERS retirement benefits -- normal, early or disability -- as well as an estimate of their future TSP savings and Social Security benefits on-line. To find out more, go to the *FIRSTGOV* Web site

<http://www.seniors.gov/fedcalc.html>. ■

Computer Related Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI)

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), 44 percent of all office workers experience injuries on the job and about one-third of all workers' compensation payments are a result of health problems related to ergonomic disorders. OSHA predicts that repetitive motion disorders will be one of the major health care costs in the U.S.



Repetitive strain injuries (RSI) are a result of repetitive motions, prolonged static postures and awkward postures that can occur when typing on computer keyboards. Holding the arm in positions over a keyboard for a prolonged period can result in fatigue of the muscles in the neck and shoulders area according to a report prepared by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). The report also suggests "...changing work methods to avoid working at a computer terminal for long uninterrupted periods."

Office workers need the chance to move around and rest their hands and arms rather than sitting in one position at the keyboard all day. There are many steps you can take to prevent health problems brought on by using computers. Taking short breaks throughout the day can help vary the pace of work and prevent strain injuries. Computer users should take a few

minutes every hour to stretch their arms and focus their eyes on an object in the distance in addition to their other scheduled breaks.

Other factors that may aid in avoiding RSI are the position of the keyboard and mouse. The keyboard should rest just above a person's lap, with their arms hanging naturally at their sides and their wrists floating lower than their elbows. Foam rubber wrist rests can help keep a person's wrists parallel to the ground. Foam covered chairs should be the correct height so that a person's feet are flat on the floor or a foot rest should be used. Chairs should be curved so that the backrest has a slight backward angle. It should also provide proper lumbar support for the lower back.

The position of the computer monitor is also important to avoid eyestrain, fatigue, and headaches. The monitor should be at least 28 inches away from the user, about an arm's length. The top of the monitor should be at eye level. Lowering general lighting levels will diminish glare. Workstations can be equipped with task lights to provide higher lighting levels for paper-based work. Also minimize placing monitors near windows to avoid glare.

Following these simple procedures can help create a more ergonomically sound workplace where employees can avoid RSI related injuries. ■

ORM NEWS is a monthly publication of the Office of Resolution Management (ORM). Please contact Terry Washington or Tyrone Eddins, External Affairs Program, by e-mail or by calling (202) 501-2800 concerning the contents of this newsletter. Back copies of the newsletter can be found on our Web site at <http://www.va.gov/orm/NewsEvents.htm>